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3 Reasons to Avoid the All-You-Can-Eat Buffet—and 7 Ways to Make it Healthier

Monday Sep 1 | BY [Colleen M. Story](#) |

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The all-you-can-eat buffet may be tasty and inexpensive, but it can also be extremely unhealthy.

Buffets can be a great option. Everyone can get something they like. You can dish up your own food, so you get more of the things you do want, and less of those you don't. You can afford to be picky without having to deal with the pain of explaining your preferences to a waitress. The price is usually reasonable.

But buffets can also be really bad for your health. Here's what we know, and how you may be able to protect yourself from the dangers the next time you go.

1. There's a greater risk of overeating.

According to a Johns Hopkins special report, buffets encourage overeating because they provide such a wide variety—we want to try it all! A 1981 study, for instance, found that men were offered sandwiches with four different fillings ate a third more than when offered sandwiches with just one filling. In a separate experiment, subjects given three flavors of yogurt ate significantly more than when given just one flavor, even if the flavor was their favorite.

A later 2008 study found that when eating at Chinese buffets, overweight individuals sat 16 feet closer to the buffet, faced the food, used larger plates, and served themselves immediately instead of browsing the buffet—all behaviors researchers stated led to overeating. What was puzzling was that the participants weren't aware of these behaviors.

2. Many foods are heavily processed and laden with preservatives.

People like all-you-can-eat buffets because they offer a lot of food for a reasonable price. That means the food, however, is most likely highly processed, and therefore contains a number of potentially unhealthy preservatives and chemicals. The food sits out in the open air for hours at a time, in most cases, so it's likely chocked with preservatives to avoid contamination. Unless you're visiting a quality buffet, it's also likely that many of the food items are cheap and low quality, to help the restaurant stay in the black.

Monosodium glutamate, high fructose corn syrup, trans fats, and GMO ingredients are just some of the potentially dangerous ingredients you may be exposed to.

3. Staff may be careless with food storage.

In 2013, the news broke that a Florida Golden Corral restaurant was storing trays of perishable food items like hamburger patties, chicken, and ribs right beside the dumpster outside of the building. The restaurant was reportedly being inspected, so employees moved the uncovered food quickly outside where it was exposed to hot temperatures and flies.

This was just one incident, but according to the Center for Science in the Public Interest (CPSI), outbreak data show that Americans are twice as likely to get food poisoning from food prepared in a restaurant than food prepared at home.

At a buffet, the risk seems even higher, as employees are rushing around preparing and transferring food, increasing the risk that they'll mishandle it somehow. People may be more likely to touch your food before you eat it, and temperature is also an issue, as hot food may be left out to cool too long.

Tips to Make it Healthier

Though there's no way to completely avoid the chemicals or preservatives that may be in some of the foods (unless you stick to fruit and fresh produce), you're likely to get some things you may not like along with your favorite tasty dish. You can reduce your risk of completely throwing off your healthy diet with the following tips:

- 1. Load up on healthy options, first.** A study from Cornell University found that starting with healthier foods may help you resist overeating. Researchers directed half of participants to a

serving line that contained cheesy scrambled eggs, potatoes, bacon, cinnamon rolls, granola, yogurt, and fruit, while the other group were sent to a line that featured the same foods in reverse order—fruit, yogurt, granola, etc. Results showed that more than 75 percent of participants took the first food they saw, and 66 percent took some of the first three foods they saw. Those who took more of the healthier options, like fruit, ate less than those who started with cheesy scrambled eggs. Those on the unhealthy line put 31 percent more items on their plate.

2. **Take advantage of the variety of fruits and veggies.** One study found something positive about buffets—people who dined there ate 76 more grams of fruits and vegetables than those who bought their meals a la carte. Researchers theorized that people were willing to try more of these items when they didn't have to pay extra for them, and that the buffet offered an attractive variety. Start your meal at the salad bar portion of the buffet and load up on colorful produce.
3. **Set a “plate limit.”** Having a wide variety of foods on your plate encourages you to eat more. Set a plate limit for yourself of no more than two to three items. You can go back and refill it if you want to, but sticking to a limit will help you better tune into your own satiety clues.
4. **Go somewhere you can pay after you eat.** Seems there is something about getting the payment out of the way that encourages people to eat more. A recent 2013 study found that when people pay beforehand, they have a desire to get their money's worth, and so will eat more to feel like they got a good deal. Waiting to pay until after the meal reduced consumption by 4.5 units.
5. **Take your time.** Those who typically overeat at buffets dive right in, rather than taking their time to peruse the options. Taking more time helps you be more selective and gives your rational brain time to make good choices.
6. **Be cautious with sauces.** Buffet cooks like to drown foods in sauces to increase flavor, but these are likely packed with chemical flavorings and preservatives. Choose food as close to its natural state as possible. Ask for freshly steamed, grilled or baked meat and steamed veggies. Add in some eggs, nuts and seeds for extra protein to keep you satisfied.
7. **Be selective.** Just like with any restaurant, it's important to choose a quality business. Watch for cleanliness, hot food, fresh produce, and employees regularly swapping out old trays for new. The more attention you see to detail, the more likely the facility is providing healthier food that is less likely to make you sick.

What do you think about all-you-can-eat buffets? Do you have other tips?

* * *

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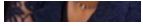
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